

THE PUZZLE.

I.

PUGH came into my room holding something wrapped in a piece of brown paper.

'Tress, I have brought you something on which you may exercise your ingenuity.' He began, with exasperating deliberation, to untie the string which bound his parcel; he is one of those persons who would not cut a knot to save their lives. The process occupied him the better part of a quarter of an hour. Then he held out the contents of the paper.

'What do you think of that?' he asked. I thought nothing of it, and I told him so. 'I was prepared for that confession. I have noticed, Tress, that you generally do think nothing of an article which really deserves the attention of a truly thoughtful mind. Possibly, as you think so little of it, you will be able to solve the puzzle.'

I took what he held out to me. It was an oblong box, perhaps seven inches long by three inches broad.

'Where's the puzzle?' I asked.

'If you will examine the lid of the box, you will see.'

I turned it over and over; it was difficult to see which was the lid. Then I perceived that on one side were printed these words:

'PUZZLE: To OPEN THE Box.'

The words were so faintly printed that it was not surprising that I had not noticed them at first. Pugh explained.

'I observed that box on a tray outside a second-hand furniture shop. It struck my eye. I took it up. I examined it. I inquired of the proprietor of the shop in what the puzzle lay. He replied that that was more than he could tell me. He himself had made several attempts to open the box, and all of them had failed. I purchased it. I took it home. I have tried, and I have failed. I am aware, Tress, of how you pride yourself upon your ingenuity. I cannot doubt that, if you try, you will not fail.'

While Pugh was prosing, I was examining the box. It was at least well made. It weighed certainly under two ounces. I struck it with my knuckles; it sounded hollow. There was no hinge; nothing of any kind to show that it ever had been

opened, or, for the matter of that, that it ever could be opened. The more I examined the thing, the more it whetted my curiosity. That it could be opened, and in some ingenious manner, I made no doubt—but how?

The box was not a new one. At a rough guess I should say that it had been a box for a good half-century; there were certain signs of age about it which could not escape a practised eye. Had it remained unopened all that time? When opened, what would be found inside? It sounded hollow; probably nothing at all—who could tell?

It was formed of small pieces of inlaid wood. Several woods had been used; some of them were strange to me. They were of different colours; it was pretty obvious that they must all of them have been hard woods. The pieces were of various shapes, hexagonal, octagonal, triangular, square, oblong, and even circular. The process of inlaying had been beautifully done. So nicely had the parts been joined that the lines of meeting were difficult to discover with the naked eye; they had been joined solid, so to speak. It was an excellent example of marquetry. I had been over hasty in my depreciation; I owned as much to Pugh.

‘This box of yours is better worth looking at than I first supposed. Is it to be sold?’

‘No, it is not to be sold. Nor’—he ‘fixed’ me with his spectacles—‘is it to be given away. I have brought it to you for the simple purpose of ascertaining if you have ingenuity enough to open it.’

‘I will engage to open it in two seconds—with a hammer.’

‘I dare say. I will open it with a hammer. The thing is to open it without.’

‘Let me see.’ I began, with the aid of a microscope, to examine the box more closely. ‘I will give you one piece of information, Pugh. Unless I am mistaken, the secret lies in one of these little pieces of inlaid wood. You push it, or you press it, or something, and the whole affair flies open.’

‘Such was my own first conviction. I am not so sure of it now. I have pressed every separate piece of wood; I have tried to move each piece in every direction. No result has followed. My theory was a hidden spring.’

‘But there must be a hidden spring of some sort, unless you are to open it by a mere exercise of force. I suppose the box is empty.’

'I thought it was at first, but now I am not so sure of that either. It all depends on the position in which you hold it. Hold it in this position—like this—close to your ear. Have you a small hammer?' I took a small hammer. 'Tap it, softly, with the hammer. Don't you notice a sort of reverberation within?'

Pugh was right, there certainly was something within; something which seemed to echo back my tapping, almost as if it were a living thing. I mentioned this to Pugh.

'But you don't think that there is something alive inside the box? There can't be. The box must be air-tight, probably as much air-tight as an exhausted receiver.'

'How do we know that? How can we tell that no minute interstices have been left for the express purpose of ventilation?' I continued tapping with the hammer. I noticed one peculiarity, that it was only when I held the box in a particular position, and tapped at a certain spot, that there came the answering taps from within. 'I tell you what it is, Pugh, what I hear is the reverberation of some machinery.'

'Do you think so?'

'I'm sure of it.'

'Give the box to me.' Pugh put the box to his ear. He tapped. 'It sounds to me like the echoing tick, tick of some great beetle; like the sort of noise which a death watch makes, you know.'

Trust Pugh to find a remarkable explanation for a simple fact; if the explanation leans towards the supernatural, so much the more satisfactory to Pugh. I knew better.

'The sound which you hear is merely the throbbing, or the trembling, of the mechanism with which it is intended that the box should be opened. The mechanism is placed just where you are tapping it with the hammer. Every tap causes it to jar.'

'It sounds to me like the ticking of a death watch. However, on such subjects, Tress, I know what you are.'

'My dear Pugh, give it an extra hard tap, and you will see.'

He gave it an extra hard tap. The moment he had done so, he started.

'I've done it now.'

'What have you done?'

'Broken something, I fancy.' He listened intently, with his ear to the box. 'No—it seems all right. And yet I could have sworn I h d damaged something; I heard it smash.'

'Give me the box.' He gave it me. In my turn, I listened. I shook the box. Pugh must have been mistaken. Nothing rattled ; there was not a sound ; the box was as empty as before. I gave a smart tap with the hammer, as Pugh had done. Then there certainly was a curious sound. To my ear, it sounded like the smashing of glass. 'I wonder if there is anything fragile inside your precious puzzle, Pugh, and, if so, if we are shivering it by degrees ?'

II.

'What is that noise ?'

I lay in bed in that curious condition which is between sleep and waking. When, at last, I knew that I was awake, I asked myself what it was that had woke me. Suddenly I became conscious that something was making itself audible in the silence of the night. For some seconds I lay and listened. Then I sat up in bed.

'What is that noise ?'

It was like the tick, tick, tick of some large and unusually clear-toned clock. It might have been a clock, had it not been that the sound was varied, every half-dozen ticks or so, by a sort of stifled screech, such as might have been uttered by some small creature in an extremity of anguish. I got out of bed ; it was ridiculous to think of sleep during the continuation of that uncanny shrieking. I struck a light. The sound seemed to come from the neighbourhood of my dressing-table. I went to the dressing-table, the lighted match in my hand, and, as I did so, my eyes fell on Pugh's mysterious box. That same instant there issued, from the bowels of the box, a more uncomfortable screech than any I had previously heard. It took me so completely by surprise that I let the match fall from my hand to the floor. The room was in darkness. I stood, I will not say trembling, listening —considering their volume—to the eeriest shrieks I ever heard. All at once they ceased. Then came the tick, tick, tick again. I struck another match, and lit the gas.

Pugh had left his puzzle box behind him. We had done all we could, together, to solve the puzzle. He had left it behind to see what I could do with it alone. So much had it engrossed my attention that I had even brought it into my bedroom, in order that I might, before retiring to rest, make a final attempt at the solution of the mystery. Now what possessed the thing ?

As I stood, and looked, and listened, one thing began to be clear to me, that some sort of machinery had been set in motion inside the box. How it had been set in motion was another matter. But the box had been subjected to so much handling, to such pressing and such hammering, that it was not strange if, after all, Pugh or I had unconsciously hit upon the spring which set the whole thing going. Possibly the mechanism had got so rusty that it had refused to act at once. It had hung fire, and only after some hours had something or other set the imprisoned motive power free.

But what about the screeching? Could there be some living creature concealed within the box? Was I listening to the cries of some small animal in agony? Momentary reflection suggested that the explanation of the one thing was the explanation of the other. Rust!—there was the mystery. The same rust which had prevented the mechanism from acting at once was causing the screeching now. The uncanny sounds were caused by nothing more nor less than the want of a drop or two of oil. Such an explanation would not have satisfied Tress; it satisfied me.

Picking up the box, I placed it to my ear.

'I wonder how long this little performance is going to continue. And what is going to happen when it is good enough to cease? I hope'—an uncomfortable thought occurred to me—'I hope Pugh hasn't picked up some pleasant little novelty in the way of an infernal machine. It would be a first-rate joke if he and I had been endeavouring to solve the puzzle of how to set it going.'

I don't mind owning that as this reflection crossed my mind I replaced Pugh's puzzle on the dressing-table. The idea did not commend itself to me at all. The box evidently contained some curious mechanism. It might be more curious than comfortable. Possibly some agreeable little device in clockwork. The tick, tick, tick suggested clockwork which had been planned to go a certain time, and then—then, for all I knew, ignite an explosive, and—blow up. It would be a charming solution to the puzzle if it were to explode while I stood there, in my nightshirt, looking on. It is true that the box weighed very little. Probably, as I have said, the whole affair would not have turned the scale at a couple of ounces. But then its very lightness might have been part of the ingenious inventor's little game. There are explosives with which one can work a very satisfactory amount of damage with considerably less than a couple of ounces.

While I was hesitating—I own it!—whether I had not better immerse Pugh's puzzle in a can of water, or throw it out of the window, or call down Bob with a request to at once remove it to his apartment, both the tick, tick, tick, and the screeching ceased, and all within the box was still. If it *was* going to explode, it was now or never. Instinctively I moved in the direction of the door.

I waited with a certain sense of anxiety. I waited in vain. Nothing happened, not even a renewal of the sound.

'I wish Pugh had kept his precious puzzle at home. This sort of thing tries one's nerves.'

When I thought that I perceived that nothing seemed likely to happen, I returned to the neighbourhood of the table. I looked at the box askance. I took it up gingerly. Something might go off at any moment for all I knew. It would be too much of a joke if Pugh's precious puzzle exploded in my hand. I shook it doubtfully; nothing rattled. I held it to my ear; there was not a sound. What had taken place? Had the clock-work run down, and was the machine arranged with such diabolical ingenuity that a certain interval was required, after the clockwork had run down, before an explosion could occur? Or had rust caused the mechanism to again hang fire?

'After making all that commotion the thing might at least come open.' I banged the box viciously against the corner of the table. I felt that I would almost rather that an explosion should take place than that nothing should occur. One does not care to be disturbed from one's sound slumber in the small hours of the morning for a trifle.

'I've half a mind to get a hammer, and try, as they say in the cookery books, another way.'

Unfortunately I had promised Pugh to abstain from using force. I might have shivered the box open with my hammer, and then explained that it had fallen, or got trod upon, or sat upon, or something, and so got shattered, only I was afraid that Pugh would not believe me. The man is himself such an untruthful man that he is in a chronic state of suspicion about the truthfulness of others.

'Well, if you're not going to blow up, or open, or something, I'll say good night.'

I gave the box a final rap with my knuckles and a final shake, replaced it on the table, put out the gas, and returned to bed.

I was just sinking again into slumber, when that box began again. It was true that Pugh had purchased the puzzle, but it was evident that the whole enjoyment of his purchase was destined to be mine. It was useless to think of sleep while that performance was going on. I sat up in bed once more.

'It strikes me that the puzzle consists in finding out how it is possible to go to sleep with Pugh's purchase in your bedroom. This is far better than the old-fashioned prescription of cats on the tiles.'

It struck me the noise was distinctly louder than before ; this applied both to the tick, tick, tick, and the screeching.

'Possibly,' I told myself, as I relighted the gas, 'the explosion is to come off this time.'

I turned to look at the box. There could be no doubt about it ; the noise was louder. And, if I could trust my eyes, the box was moving—giving a series of little jumps. This might have been an optical delusion, but it seemed to me that at each tick the box gave a little bound. During the screeches—which sounded more like the cries of an animal in an agony of pain even than before—if it did not tilt itself first on one end, and then on the other, I shall never be willing to trust the evidence of my own eyes again. And surely the box had increased in size ; I could have sworn not only that it had increased, but that it was increasing, even as I stood there looking on. It had grown, and still was growing, both broader, and longer, and deeper. Pugh, of course, would have attributed it to supernatural agency ; there never was a man with such a nose for a ghost. I could picture him occupying my position, shivering in his night-shirt, as he beheld that miracle taking place before his eyes. The solution which at once suggested itself to me—and which would *never* have suggested itself to Pugh!—was that the box was fashioned, as it were, in layers, and that the ingenious mechanism it contained was forcing the sides at once both upwards and outwards. I took it in my hand. I could feel something striking against the bottom of the box, like the tap, tap, tapping of a tiny hammer.

'This is a pretty puzzle of Pugh's. He would say that that is the tapping of a death watch. For my part I have not much faith in death watches, *et hoc genus omne*, but it certainly is a curious tapping. I wonder what is going to happen next ?'

Apparently nothing, except a continuation of those mysterious sounds. That the box had increased in size I had, and have, no

doubt whatever. I should say that it had increased a good inch in every direction, at least half an inch while I had been looking on. But while I stood looking its growth was suddenly and perceptibly stayed; it ceased to move. Only the noise continued.

'I wonder how long it will be before anything worth happening does happen? I suppose something is going to happen; there can't be all this to-do for nothing. If it is anything in the infernal machine line, and there is going to be an explosion, I might as well be here to see it. I think I'll have a pipe.'

I put on my dressing-gown. I lit my pipe. I sat and stared at the box. I dare say I sat there for quite twenty minutes when, as before, without any sort of warning, the sound was stilled. Its sudden cessation rather startled me.

'Has the mechanism again hung fire? Or, this time, is the explosion coming off?' It did not come off; nothing came off. 'Isn't the box even going to open?'

It did not open. There was simply silence all at once, and that was all. I sat there in expectation for some moments longer. But I sat for nothing. I rose. I took the box in my hand. I shook it.

'This puzzle is a puzzle.' I held the box first to one ear, then to the other. I gave it several sharp raps with my knuckles. There was not an answering sound, not even the sort of reverberation which Pugh and I had noticed at first. It seemed hollower than ever. It was as though the soul of the box was dead. 'I suppose if I put you down, and extinguish the gas and return to bed, in about half an hour or so, just as I am dropping off to sleep, the performance will be recommenced. Perhaps the third time will be lucky.'

But I was mistaken—there was no third time. When I returned to bed that time I returned to sleep, and I was allowed to sleep; there was no continuation of the performance, at least so far as I know. For no sooner was I once more between the sheets than I was seized with an irresistible drowsiness, a drowsiness which so mastered me that I—I imagine it must have been instantly—sank into slumber which lasted till long after day had dawned. Whether or not any more mysterious sounds issued from the bowels of Pugh's puzzle is more than I can tell. If they did, they did not succeed in rousing me.

And yet, when at last I did awake, I had a sort of consciousness that my waking had been caused by something strange. What it was I could not surmise. My own impression was that I had been

awoke by the touch of a person's hand. But that impression must have been a mistaken one, because, as I could easily see by looking round the room, there was no one in the room to touch me.

It was broad daylight. I looked at my watch ; it was nearly eleven o'clock. I am a pretty late sleeper as a rule, but I do not usually sleep as late as that. That scoundrel Bob would let me sleep all day without thinking it necessary to call me. I was just about to spring out of bed, with the intention of ringing the bell so that I might give Bob a piece of my mind for allowing me to sleep so late, when my glance fell on the dressing-table on which, the night before, I had placed Pugh's puzzle. It had gone !

Its absence so took me by surprise that I ran to the table. It had gone. But it had not gone far ; it had gone to pieces ! There were the pieces lying where the box had been. The puzzle had solved itself. The box was open, open with a vengeance, one might say. Like that unfortunate Humpty Dumpty, who, so the chroniclers tell us, sat on a wall, surely 'all the king's horses and all the king's men' never could put Pugh's puzzle together again !

The marquetry had resolved itself into its component parts. How those parts had ever been joined was a mystery. They had been laid upon no foundation, as is the case with ordinary inlaid work. The several pieces of wood were not only of different shapes and sizes, but they were as thin as the thinnest veneer ; yet the box had been formed by simply joining them together. The man who made that box must have been possessed of ingenuity worthy of a better cause.

I perceived how the puzzle had been worked. The box had contained an arrangement of springs which, on being released, had expanded themselves in different directions until their mere expansion had rent the box to pieces. There were the springs, lying amidst the ruin they had caused.

There was something else amidst that ruin besides those springs ; there was a small piece of writing-paper. I took it up. On the reverse side of it was written, in a minute, crabbed hand, 'A Present For You.' What was a present for me ? I looked, and, not for the first time since I had caught sight of Pugh's precious puzzle, could scarcely believe my eyes.

There, poised between two upright wires, the bent ends of which held it aloft in the air, was either a piece of glass, or—a crystal. 'The scrap of writing-paper had exactly covered it. I

understood what it was, which, when Pugh and I had tapped with the hammer, had caused the answering taps to proceed from within. Our taps had caused the wires to oscillate, and in these oscillations the crystal, which they held suspended, had touched the side of the box.

I looked again at the piece of paper. ‘A Present For You.’ Was *this* the present—this crystal? I regarded it intently.

‘It *can’t* be a diamond.’

The idea was ridiculous, absurd. No man in his senses would place a diamond inside a twopenny-halfpenny puzzle box. The thing was as big as a walnut! And yet—I am a pretty good judge of precious stones—if it was not an uncut diamond it was the best imitation I had seen. I took it up. I examined it closely. The more closely I examined it, the more my wonder grew.

‘It *is* a diamond!’

And yet the idea was too preposterous for credence. Who would present a diamond as big as a walnut with a trumpery puzzle? Besides, all the diamonds which the world contains, of that size, are almost as well known as the Koh-i-noor.

‘If it is a diamond, it is worth—it is worth—Heaven only knows what it isn’t worth, if it’s a diamond.’

I regarded it through a strong pocket lens. As I did so I could not restrain an exclamation.

‘The world to a China orange, it *is* a diamond!’

The words had scarcely escaped my lips than there came a tapping at the door.

‘Come in!’ I cried, supposing it was Bob. It was not Bob, it was Pugh. Instinctively I put the lens and the crystal behind my back. At sight of me in my night-shirt Pugh began to shake his head.

‘What hours, Tress, what hours! Why, my dear Tress, I’ve breakfasted, read the papers and my letters, come all the way from my house here, and you’re not up!’

‘Don’t I look as though I were up?’

‘Ah, Tress! Tress!’ He approached the dressing-table. His eye fell upon the ruins. ‘What’s this?’

‘That’s the solution to the puzzle.’

‘Have you—have you solved it, fairly, Tress?’

‘It has solved itself. Our handling, and tapping, and hammering must have freed the springs which the box contained, and during the night, while I slept, they have caused it to come open.

‘While you slept? Dear me! How strange! And—what are these?’

He had discovered the two upright wires on which the crystal had been poised.

‘I suppose they’re part of the puzzle.’

‘And was there anything in the box? What’s this?’ He picked up the scrap of paper; I had left it on the table. He read what was written on it. ‘“A Present For You;” what’s it mean? Tress, was this in the box?’

‘It was.’

‘What’s it mean about a present? Was there anything in the box besides?’

‘Pugh, if you will leave the room I shall be able to dress; I am not in the habit of receiving quite such early calls, or I should have been prepared to receive you. If you will wait in the next room, I will be with you as soon as I’m dressed. There is a little subject in connection with the box which I wish to discuss with you.’

‘A subject in connection with the box? What is the subject?’

‘I will tell you, Pugh, when I have performed my toilet.’

‘Why can’t you tell me now?’

‘Do you propose, then, that I should stand here shivering in my shirt while you are prosing at your ease? Thank you; I am obliged, but I decline. May I ask you once more, Pugh, to wait for me in the adjoining apartment?’

He moved towards the door. When he had taken a couple of steps, he halted.

‘I—I hope, Tress, that you’re—you’re going to play no tricks on me.’

‘Tricks on you! Is it likely that I am going to play tricks upon my oldest friend?’

When he had gone—he vanished, it seemed to me, with a somewhat doubtful visage—I took the crystal to the window. I drew the blind. I let the sunshine fall on it. I examined it again, closely and minutely, with the aid of my pocket lens. It was a diamond; there could not be a doubt of it. If, with my knowledge of stones, I was deceived, then I was deceived as never man had been deceived before. My heart beat faster as I recognised the fact that I was holding in my hand what was, in all probability, a fortune for a man of moderate desires. Of course,

Pugh knew nothing of what I had discovered, and there was no reason why he should know. Not the least! The only difficulty was that if I kept my own counsel, and sold the stone and utilised the proceeds of the sale, I should have to invent a story which would account for my sudden accession to fortune. Pugh knows almost as much of my affairs as I do myself. That is the worst of these old friends!

When I joined Pugh I found him dancing up and down the floor like a bear upon hot plates. He scarcely allowed me to put my nose inside the door before attacking me.

‘Tress, give me what was in the box.’

‘My dear Pugh, how do you know that there was something in the box to give you?’

‘I know there was!’

‘Indeed! If you know that there was something in the box, perhaps you will tell me what that something was.’

He eyed me doubtfully. Then, advancing, he laid upon my arm a hand which positively trembled.

‘Tress, you—you wouldn’t play tricks on an old friend.’

‘You are right, Pugh, I wouldn’t. Though I believe there have been occasions on which you have had doubts upon the subject. By the way, Pugh, I believe that I am the oldest friend you have.’

‘I—I don’t know about that. There’s—there’s Brasher.’

‘Brasher! Who’s Brasher? You wouldn’t compare my friendship to the friendship of such a man as Brasher? Think of the tastes we have in common, you and I. We’re both collectors.’

‘Ye—es, we’re—we’re both collectors.’

‘I make my interests yours, and you make my interests mine. Isn’t that so, Pugh?’

‘Tress, what—what was in the box?’

‘I will be frank with you, Pugh. If there had been something in the box, would you have been willing to go halves with me in my discovery?’

‘Go halves! In your discovery! Tress! Give me what is mine!’

‘With pleasure, Pugh, if you will tell me what is yours.’

‘If—if you don’t give me what was in the box I’ll—I’ll send for the police.’

‘Do! Then I shall be able to hand to them what was in the box, in order that it may be restored to its proper owner.’

‘Its proper owner! I’m its proper owner!’

‘Excuse me, but I don’t understand how that can be; at least, until the police have made inquiries. I should say that the proper owner was the person from whom you purchased the box, or, more probably, the person from whom he purchased it, and by whom, doubtless, it was sold in ignorance, or by mistake. Thus, Pugh, if you will only send for the police, we shall earn the gratitude of a person of whom we never heard in our lives—I for discovering the contents of the box, and you for returning them.’

As I said this, Pugh’s face was a study. He gasped for breath. He actually took out his handkerchief to wipe his brow.

‘Tress, I—I don’t think you need use a tone like that to me. It isn’t friendly. What—what was in the box?’

‘Let us understand each other, Pugh. If you don’t hand over what was in the box to the police, I go halves.’

Pugh began to dance about the floor.

‘What a fool I was to trust you with the box! I knew I couldn’t trust you.’ I said nothing. I turned and rang the bell. ‘What’s that for?’

‘That, my dear Pugh, is for breakfast, and, if you desire it, for the police. You know, although you have breakfasted, I haven’t. Perhaps, while I am breaking my fast, you would like to summon the representatives of law and order.’ Bob came in. I ordered breakfast. Then I turned to Pugh. ‘Is there anything you would like?’

‘No, I—I’ve breakfasted.’

‘It wasn’t of breakfast I was thinking. It was of—something else. Bob is at your service, if, for instance, you wish to send him on an errand.’

‘No, I want nothing. Bob can go.’ Bob went. Directly he was gone, Pugh turned to me. ‘You shall have half. What was in the box?’

‘I shall have half?’

‘You shall!’

‘I don’t think it is necessary that the terms of our little understanding should be expressly embodied in black and white. I fancy that, under the circumstances, I can trust you, Pugh. I believe that I am capable of seeing that, in this matter, you don’t do me. That was in the box.’

I held out the crystal between my finger and thumb.

‘What is it?’

‘That is what I desire to learn.’

‘Let me look at it.’

‘You are welcome to look at it where it is. Look at it as long as you like, and as closely.’

Pugh leant over my hand. His eyes began to gleam. He is himself not a bad judge of precious stones, is Pugh.

‘It’s—it’s—Tress!—is it a diamond?’

‘That question I have already asked myself.’

‘Let me look at it! It will be safe with me! It’s mine!’

I immediately put the thing behind my back.

‘Pardon me, it belongs neither to you nor to me. It belongs, in all probability, to the person who sold that puzzle to the man from whom you bought it—perhaps some weeping widow, Pugh, or hopeless orphan—think of it. Let us have no further misunderstanding upon that point, my dear old friend. Still, because you are my dear old friend, I am willing to trust you with this discovery of mine, on condition that you don’t attempt to remove it from my sight, and that you return it to me the moment I require you.’

‘You’re—you’re very hard on me.’ I made a movement towards my waistcoat pocket. ‘I’ll return it you!’

I handed him the crystal, and with it I handed him my pocket lens.

‘With the aid of that glass I imagine that you will be able to subject it to a more acute examination, Pugh.’

He began to examine it through the lens. Directly he did so, he gave an exclamation. In a few moments he looked up at me. His eyes were glistening behind his spectacles. I could see he trembled.

‘Tress, it’s—it’s a diamond, a Brazil diamond. It’s worth a fortune!’

‘I’m glad you think so.’

‘Glad I think so! Don’t you think that it’s a diamond?’

‘It appears to be a diamond. Under ordinary conditions I should say, without hesitation, that it was a diamond. But when I consider the circumstances of its discovery, I am driven to doubts. How much did you give for that puzzle, Pugh?’

‘Ninepence; the fellow wanted a shilling, but I gave him ninepence. He seemed content.’

‘Ninepence! Does it seem reasonable that we should find a diamond, which, if it is a diamond, is the finest stone I ever saw

and handled, in a ninepenny puzzle? It is not as though it had got into the thing by accident, it had evidently been placed there to be found, and, apparently, by any one who chanced to solve the puzzle; witness the writing on the scrap of paper.'

Pugh re-examined the crystal.

'It is a diamond! I'll stake my life that it's a diamond!'

'Still, though it be a diamond, I smell a rat!'

'What do you mean?'

'I strongly suspect that the person who placed that diamond inside that puzzle intended to have a joke at the expense of the person who discovered it. What was to be the nature of the joke is more than I can say at present, but I should like to have a bet with you that the man who compounded that puzzle was an ingenious practical joker. I may be wrong, Pugh; we shall see. But, until I have proved the contrary, I don't believe that the maddest man that ever lived would throw away a diamond worth, apparently, shall we say a thousand pounds?'

'A thousand pounds! This diamond is worth a good deal more than a thousand pounds.'

'Well, that only makes my case the stronger; I don't believe that the maddest man that ever lived would throw away a diamond worth more than a thousand pounds with such utter wantonness as seems to have characterised the action of the original owner of the stone which I found in your ninepenny puzzle, Pugh.'

'There have been some eccentric characters in the world, some very eccentric characters. However, as you say, we shall see. I fancy that I know somebody who would be quite willing to have such a diamond as this, and who, moreover, would be willing to pay a fair price for its possession; I will take it to him and see what he says.'

'Pugh, hand me back that diamond.'

'My dear Tress, I was only going—'

Bob came in with the breakfast tray.

'Pugh, you will either hand me that at once, or Bob shall summon the representatives of law and order.'

He handed me the diamond. I sat down to breakfast with a hearty appetite. Pugh stood and scowled at me.

'Joseph Tress, it is my solemn conviction, and I have no hesitation in saying so in plain English, that you're a thief.'

'My dear Pugh, it seems to me that we show every promise of becoming a couple of thieves.'

‘Don’t bracket me with you !’

‘Not at all, you are worse than I. It is you who decline to return the contents of the box to its proper owner. Put it to yourself, you have *some* common sense, my dear old friend!—do you suppose that a diamond worth more than a thousand pounds is to be *honestly* bought for ninepence ?’

He resumed his old trick of dancing about the room.

‘I was a fool ever to have let you have the box ! I ought to have known better than to have trusted you ; goodness knows you have given me sufficient cause to mistrust you ! Over and over again ! Your character is only too notorious ! You have plundered friend and foe alike—friend and foe alike ! As for the rubbish which you call your collection, nine-tenths of it, I know as a positive fact, you have stolen out and out.’

‘Who stole my Sir Walter Raleigh pipe ? Wasn’t it a man named Pugh ?’

‘Look here, Joseph Tress !’

‘I’m looking.’

‘Oh, it’s no good talking to you, not the least ! You’re—you’re dead to all the promptings of conscience ! May I inquire, Mr. Tress, what it is you propose to do ?’

‘I propose to do nothing, except summon the representatives of law and order. Failing that, my dear Pugh, I had some faint, vague, very vague idea of taking the contents of your ninepenny puzzle to a certain firm in Hatton Garden, who are dealers in precious stones, and to learn from them if they are disposed to give anything for it, and if so, what.’

‘I shall come with you.’

‘With pleasure, on condition that you pay the cab.’

‘I pay the cab ! I will pay half.’

‘Not at all. You will either pay the whole fare, or else I will have one cab and you shall have another. It is a three-shilling cab fare from here to Hatton Garden. If you propose to share my cab, you will be so good as to hand over that three shillings before we start.’

He gasped, but he handed over the three shillings. There are few things I enjoy so much as getting money out of Pugh !

On the road to Hatton Garden we wrangled nearly all the way. I own that I feel a certain satisfaction in irritating Pugh, he is such an irritable man. He wanted to know what I thought we should get for the diamond.

‘ You can’t expect to get much for the contents of a nine-penny puzzle, not even the price of a cab fare, Pugh.’

He eyed me, but for some minutes he was silent. Then he began again.

‘ Tress, I don’t think we ought to let it go for less than—than five thousand pounds.’

‘ Seriously, Pugh, I doubt whether, when the whole affair is ended, we shall get five thousand pence for it, or, for the matter of that, five thousand farthings.’

‘ But why not? Why not? It’s a magnificent stone—magnificent!—I’ll stake my life on it.’

I tapped my breast with the tips of my fingers.

‘ There’s a warning voice within my breast that ought to be in yours, Pugh! Something tells me, perhaps it is the unusually strong vein of common sense which I possess, that the contents of your ninepenny puzzle will be found to be a magnificent ‘ do—an ingenious practical joke, my friend.’

‘ I don’t believe it.’

But I think he did; at any rate, I had unsettled the foundations of his faith.

We entered the Hatton Garden office side by side; in his anxiety not to let me get before him, Pugh actually clung to my arm. The office was divided into two parts by a counter which ran from wall to wall. I advanced to a man who stood on the other side of this counter.

‘ I want to sell you a diamond.’

‘ We want to sell you a diamond,’ interpolated Pugh.

I turned to Pugh. I ‘fixed’ him with my glance.

‘ I want to sell you a diamond. Here it is. What will you give me for it?’

Taking the crystal from my waistcoat pocket I handed it to the man on the other side of the counter. Directly he got it between his fingers, and saw what it was that he had got, I noticed a sudden gleam come into his eyes.

‘ This is—this is rather a fine stone.’

Pugh nudged my arm.

‘ I told you so.’ I paid no attention to Pugh.

‘ What will you give me for it?’

‘ Do you mean, what will I give you for it cash down upon the nail?’

‘ Just so—what will you give me for it cash down upon the nail?’

The man turned the crystal over and over in his fingers.

'Well, that's rather a large order. We don't often get a chance of buying such a stone as this across the counter. What do you say to—well—to ten thousand pounds ?'

Ten thousand pounds ! It was beyond my wildest imaginings. Pugh gasped. He lurched against the counter.

'Ten thousand pounds !' he echoed.

The man on the other side glanced at him, I thought, a little curiously.

'If you can give me references, or satisfy me in any way as to your *bona fides*, I am prepared to give you for this diamond an open cheque for ten thousand pounds, or if you prefer it, the cash instead.'

I stared ; I was not accustomed to see business transacted on quite such lines as those.

'We'll take it,' murmured Pugh ; I believe he was too much overcome by his feelings to do more than murmur. I interposed.

'My dear sir, you will excuse my saying that you arrive very rapidly at your conclusions. In the first place, how can you make sure that is a diamond ?'

The man behind the counter smiled.

'I should be very ill fitted for the position which I hold if I could not tell a diamond directly I get a sight of it, especially such a stone as this.'

'But have you no tests you can apply ?'

'We have tests which we apply in cases in which doubt exists, but in this case there is no doubt whatever. I am as sure that this is a diamond as I am sure that it is air I breathe. However, here is a test.'

There was a wheel close by the speaker. It was worked by a treadle. It was more like a superior sort of travelling tinker's grindstone than anything else. The man behind the counter put his foot upon the treadle. The wheel began to revolve. He brought the crystal into contact with the swiftly revolving wheel. There was a s—s—sh ! And, in an instant, his hand was empty ; the crystal had vanished into air.

'Good Heavens !' he gasped. I never saw such a look of amazement on a human countenance before. 'It's splintered !'

POSTSCRIPT.

It was a diamond, although it *had* splintered. In that fact lay the point of the joke. The man behind the counter had not been wrong; examination of such dust as could be collected proved that fact beyond a doubt. It was declared by experts that the diamond, at some period of its history, had been subjected to intense and continuing heat. The result had been to make it as brittle as glass.

There could be no doubt that its original owner had been an expert too. He knew where he got it from, and he probably knew what it had endured. He was aware that, from a mercantile point of view, it was worthless; it could never have been cut. So, having a turn for humour of a peculiar kind, he had devoted days, and weeks, and possibly months, to the construction of that puzzle. He had placed the diamond inside, and he had enjoyed, in anticipation and in imagination, the Alnaschar visions of the lucky finder.

Pugh blamed me for the catastrophe. He said, and still says, that if I had not, in a measure, and quite gratuitously, insisted on a test, the man behind the counter would have been satisfied with the evidence of his organs of vision, and we should have been richer by ten thousand pounds. But I satisfy my conscience with the reflection that what I did at any rate was honest, though, at the same time, I am perfectly well aware that such a reflection gives Pugh no sort of satisfaction.